

But if the transformations of epistémés require accompanying economic, social, familial and political changes, then we must also agree with Marcel Xhaufflaire (the best recent interpreter of Feuerbach) that ‘theology’ faces a period of praxis first.<sup>1</sup> It is worth remembering that Régis Debray, like Michel Foucault, is a student of the Marxist Louis Althusser, and that Lacan’s group of psychoanalysts played an active role in the May ’68 événements.

We have long suppressed the other, unwelcome, aspect of the news of self-chosen death that reached us at Golgotha—the task of re-creating the world. Only after we have returned to that might we be able to recall the forgotten name of the author of the four last things—not Signor Signorelli, but ‘that which we call “God”’. But perhaps some things are best displaced and forgotten—for a time?

## **The Burden of the White Man’s God**

by Rob van der Hart, O.P.

In the land of our fathers there are many strangers. They have drifted away from their homes, across the sea, into the New World which they held to be ‘undiscovered’. Why did they seek a new land, and why did they leave their own? Why did they leave behind the soil from which they were born; why did they break away from the womb to which they belong?

With their minds disconnected—and freed—from the earth, they could master the forces of nature. And so they took possession of the land that seemed so empty, so much there for the taking, because no one claimed it. They did not know that man does not naturally possess the land to which he belongs; he does not say: ‘I own this soil’. For how can we own the soil from which we are born and to which we will return? Is not man’s life encompassed by the earth and her dark forces, as in a wider dimension from which things and deeds receive their meaning?

Primitive man still knows this: he knows that the heat of the sun is only a blessing when it enkindles the potentialities of the earth, not when it scorches, burns into things so that everything withers. The warmth of God is felt in the fire that burns within the dark energies of the earth and that brings them to life. The God of natural man is an inward God whom he meets when dwelling with the mystery of his own existence, birth and death: the womb from which he is born and into which he will return. The earth is not God, but God is the earth, for here is the place where the divine presence is felt.

<sup>1</sup>Xhaufflaire, *Feuerbach et la théologie de la sécularisation*, 1970.

But the God of the whites resides only in heaven: a pale sun that shines without giving warmth. It is a totally spiritual God, a God made of ideas. And so this man had forgotten what it means to belong to the earth. He came and 'discovered' the land, the soil that no one claimed. It was not occupied and hardly cultivated, it did not yield its fruits because it had not been subdued enough. And the man from Europe said, 'The land is now mine, I claim it in the name of the Queen and of the King; and I shall make it work, together with the people that belong to it'. For man must rule the earth, be lord over it, because he is made in the image of the Creator. And if a man still belongs to the land then he shall be ruled as well. The dark races shall yield and serve so long as they belong to the land, till they too realize that the land is to be possessed. Sometimes the white man bought the land from the chiefs. The gifts were accepted but nobody really knew what they were for—till the whites came to demand in the name of justice (their justice) that the price paid was honoured and the land was handed over to their authority. Amongst the Maoris of New Zealand it was said:

These men, these missionaries, were always telling us, 'Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven'. And so, while we were looking up to heaven, our land was snatched away from beneath our feet.

These words were, in fact, spoken by an adherent of the Hauhau movement, which is an early manifestation of a religious ferment which has been ripening all over the world in the last century. All over the world similar sayings are heard from the lips of countless prophets who form the inspired force behind an ever-growing nativistic-religious movement, denouncing the Christian Churches from Europe as the sole interpreters of divine revelation. 'At first we had the land and you had the Bible. Now we have the Bible and you have the land.'

Surely, it was not just greediness that made the Europeans search for all the hidden riches of the earth. It was a vocation, a calling, to be masters over the world: a task which they had to take upon themselves because the others had so obviously failed to respond to their divine mission. So they took the gold from the heart of the earth and the silver from her depth, they laid bare the treasures of the mountains, reorganized the vegetation, improved the cultivation of the land so that it would yield all its fruits. These fruits were carried away in large ships to thirsty markets, and the same ships returned loaded with the mysterious cargoes of machinery, arms, and all the other things that made men into masters, made them the dominant race of the whites.

The ship's cargo is the power that comes with the divine mission; it is the prerogative of messengers from the gods. On the beaches of Polynesian and Melanesian islands many groups of people gather to await with dancing and singing the treasures from over the sea that are destined for them. They have turned the cargo into an object of

worship, believing it to be sent by the spirits of the deceased ancestors. The whites were supposed to be only messengers and executives, but they had appropriated all the goods for themselves. One day, however—so was announced by the archangel Gabriel—the spirits themselves will return (and perhaps Christ will be with them) on a ship loaded with cargo for the indigenous people. Angels will climb down from heaven along the ropes that are held in readiness, and they will teach the people all the skills that are needed. At that moment the final liberation will have come. Then let us stop working and provoke the Lord with singing, our dancing will hasten the coming of the spirits. For the prophecy has been heard through the mouth of our own Messiah that liberation is near.

Now this so-called Cargo Cult is only one example of a type of religious movement which is rapidly spreading throughout what was once the colonial world, and which (I think) must be regarded as by far the most important development within the Christian ambience. Indeed, the Churches from Europe may still look very impressive: they are wealthy and dominate the scene through their large buildings and mighty institutions, and they are usually strong in the centres of government. But the keen observer knows that already in many parts of the newer world they are easily left behind, both in numbers and in influence, by these new religious bodies.

In more general terms the movement may perhaps be described as an explorative reaction to the challenge of Western culture and religion, a first attempt to recover from the onslaught of the white man's God on a traditional pattern of thought and behaviour. The movement can be said to be 'Christian' inasmuch as elements of the Christian religion are incorporated, and are in a sense taken as the basis for belief: centres round which a new religious body takes shape, rather like specks of dust attracting the invisible vapour of peoples' religious aspirations which thus shape themselves into a cloud visible to us. It sometimes happens that one of those newly formed 'clouds' seeks official recognition as Christian religion, like for example *The Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu* in the Congo which became a member of the World Council of Churches. Yet, despite these incidental cases, we cannot really say that a serious attempt has been made to adopt the norms by which Western Churches would recognize themselves as Christian. On the whole one is left with the impression that ultimately it does not matter much which aspects of Christianity are adopted. It may be baptism, although in some cases this may be left out altogether. To some, baptism appeals so much that they keep repeating it throughout their lives. Equally the washing of the feet could be looked upon as a religious event of major importance while the eucharist is judged to be of no relevance, but it may also be the other way round. It is even possible that a seemingly purely accidental

aspect of Christianity is chosen as the crucial part, something which a missionary has been seen doing but which was no more than part of his private life.

It has taken some time, but now, in the last few decades, we begin to see the first signs of alarm among the Christian Churches. Many natives have, indeed, entered through baptism, but now they appear to be walking away on the other side of the water. Some, particularly keen on the idea of *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (the doctrine that there is no salvation outside the Church of Jesus Christ), are concerned with the fate of the millions who are slipping out of the nets of the divine purpose in Christ. But even more worrying, perhaps, should be that the Church will possibly never again have the chance to live up to her own ideal of catholicity, that she is, in fact, not so universal as is claimed. 'Go forth therefore and make all nations my disciples; baptize men everywhere in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you.' Yet, it looks as if Christianity is still basically a European affair.

Little or no progress was made among the peoples that had embraced the creeds of the other world religions, Mohammedanism, Hinduism, etc. But the mission fields of America, Africa and Oceania looked very promising: they yielded a rich harvest for a religion that had lost much of its prestige in Europe itself. Here the tribal religions (they are the 'invisible' religions which have no temples, no clear doctrines and are mostly even without mighty gods) offered little resistance to the force of Christian preaching, and the ancient pagan superstitions easily gave way to the white man's scientific knowledge. The Primitive may be superstitious, but he is also unspoiled in his simplicity: he almost naturally understands the message of Jesus Christ, 'Let the children come unto me'. And so they come up to the mission stations in thousands, asking for the faith. For they are the ones who have not defiled themselves with knowledge and have not lost the art of believing. Conversions *en masse* are by no means things of the past; they still happen, as I can witness from experience. Within a few months after the first contact with a Catholic missionary, the community of the village M. (somewhere in the Transvaal) had formed a large Christian congregation. The instruction in the faith took little time but was thorough and intense. I had the good fortune to be asked to take the Sunday services which were always very well attended. After a few times, however, I began to notice an interesting shift in the social structure of our religious community (which may have been due partly to my own inability and unwillingness to act out the role a Catholic priest is supposed to play). From being the authoritative centre, I found myself gradually reduced to some sort of mute point round which the religious community structured itself. I no longer preached as from a centre of inspiration—*ite missa est*—, sending the people into an outer world that awaited

the redemptive act. Rather, the perspective became one of inwardness that left the world outside void and empty. And in a self-enclosing movement the group began to gravitate towards its own heart of darkness. So the people protected themselves against the outer world and its hardships by turning away from it towards the mysterious hole within their own existence, in which all the pains and sufferings are absorbed. Such things are not known with a clear and distinct knowledge that can point to certain heretical doctrines as the cause of this metamorphosis, and there was no apparent difference between what was done and what should have been done according to the official rubrics. It was rather an indefinable sensation, an unsettling feeling that the people were concerned with a dimension which was beyond the reach of the doctrines of my Church.

Most of the time was taken up by confessions, every Sunday, with large crowds attending. And this ceremony, in particular, struck me as hoarding a meaning that escaped any known theological definition of this sacrament. I was put in a room next to the one where Mass was held and where people were chanting their hymns. The penitents came in a long, long line, in-and-out with great regularity, saying their penance (or whatever) under the tree just outside the door. And it lasted and lasted, so much so that I began to suspect that some had queued up again, as if they were going round in a long and drawn-out dance, cutting out of the world a circle of sin, evil and darkness.

Then back home again, and on such Sundays one sees (if one wants to look) many clots of people having their own religious gatherings, in the open field, under a tree, or even in a modest building: singing and dancing to the slow and regular beating of the drum, wheeling round in their own closed and inward circle, making their own 'church'. (In South Africa alone there are tens of thousands of such 'churches', some fairly large, but others numbering not more than ten or twelve members.) Some of these churches have mounted a lorry that takes the singing congregation to their place of worship. And yet, they are not really separated from one another in the way the European Churches are. For they do not look outwardly at others, judging their orthodoxy according to some formal set of doctrines. But they have all turned to the infinite space that is revealed inside the circle, where the soul lets itself be immersed in the unquestioning dream of its own mystery, and rests there together with others in a unity that defies uniformity. And so all these religious groupings seem to form one immense movement of wheeling human circles, weaving themselves into a pattern that spreads over the whole of Africa, and eventually finds a connexion with such a movement throughout the world wherever the Christian gospel has left its vestiges in traditional patterns of religious behaviour. It is found in America, north, middle and south: in the Peyote Cult, the Ghost Dance, Voodooism, etc. In Melanesia we

have already met the Cargo Cult, and there are many others. In Africa there are the so-called Independent Churches. For those who look for doctrines, rubrics and grand organizations, the movement will remain invisible; they will see merely bizarre groups with quasi-Christian pretensions scattered over the earth, nothing to worry about. But in fact they are as clouds that, in an infinite variety of shapes, have condensed round aspects of the Christian religion, clouds that make themselves manifest when they darken the horizon of a world that lives by the superficial structures that were left behind by the colonial rulers (e.g. the *Cult of the Seraphim and Cherubim* in the Congo crisis).

These 'clouds' may be totally different in form, and yet they are the realizations of the same thing. But there are also a few things that all these diverse religions have in common.

Almost invariably there is the drum as the dominating musical instrument, tyrannizing the will through its dark and introverted beating, a beat that does not sing out to heaven, but which sounds within the vibration of its own hollow inside. We must not underestimate the importance of the drum as an expression of religious sentiment. It is far more than an aid in the liturgy that can be replaced by any other instrument; the drum *is* almost the religion of the earth. It speaks with a voice of its own, as of itself, with no recognizable melody, and its sound does not subject itself to a tune which carries man's beliefs and hopes to heaven or out into the world. The pulsating rhythm forces the singing into a sort of recitative, ebbing on indefinitely throughout the night into day-break.

Where things are not ruled by doctrines nor regulated by strict rubrics there is usually also the prophet in whom the religious community finds identification. He is not necessarily learned nor primarily wise, but above all a person of prestige (if that is a good translation of 'mana') who articulates, more so in his person than in his words, the new aspirations, feelings and emotions. He is the new man who emerges in the troublesome period of decolonialization when the people are seeking their new identity, after the Christian God in heaven has been married to the earth; after the burden of the white man's God has been absorbed in the people's own past. It is a new thrill, a new inspiration to be grafted on to a tradition that appeared unable to resist the invasion from above: incarnation, a new Messiah, a new Christ.

Is this, then, merely a passing phenomenon that can be explained away in the circumstances and that can be fully counteracted once it is understood? Or are we here not rather confronted with the emergence of a radically new type of religion that came into being through a need in natural man to find a way for carrying the burden of the white man's God. 'Bishop', said a convert to the Cargo Cult, 'many years ago we received the faith from you. Now we return

it to you, for there has been found a new and precious thing by which we shall keep our land.'

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*In a following article I shall discuss what perspectives there are for Christianity in a decolonized world.*

## The Trinity and Human Love

### by G. F. Mackrell, S.M.M.

#### *Is the Trinity relevant?*

'Batter my heart, three-Personed God', wrote the poet John Donne. However, it has been the mind, not the heart, which has been battered by this most unfathomable of all mysteries. Centuries of long and painful battering of unitarian hammer on tritheistic anvil eventually forged a statement which expressed the mystery: three persons in one nature. And ever since the Council of Florence there has echoed down the centuries a thunderous 'So what?'. For the riddle of the Trinity is not merely that of the Three-in-one, but the revelation of it. Not 'how?', but 'why?'. What is its relevance?

Karl Rahner, in his *Theological Investigations*, is exaggerating only slightly when he notes:

'One might almost dare to affirm that if the doctrine of the Trinity were to be erased as false, most religious literature could be preserved almost unchanged throughout the process. And it cannot be objected that the Incarnation is such a theologically and religiously central element in Christian life that on that account the Trinity is always and everywhere irremovably present. For when the Incarnation of God is spoken of, theological and religious intention is today concentrated on the fact that "God" has become man, that "a" person of the Trinity has assumed flesh—but not on the fact that this person is precisely that of the Word, Logos.'<sup>1</sup>

#### *Difficulties*

In the attempt to make the Trinity relevant one is beset by problems which appear insoluble. The most obvious of these is the danger of falling into the error of 'tritheism'. Rahner refers to this in his study, and Father Mackay gives a fuller account of how popular preaching can frequently be tempted into making the Trinity 'a

<sup>1</sup>*Theological Investigations*, Vol. IV, Ch. 3, pp. 78-79.